

## Original Message

From: Payton, Robert

Sent: Sunday, September 16, 2001 11:38 AM

Subject: The long view

Stalin, who should know, once said that "revenge must be eaten cold." I think that's the new national strategy to deal with terrorism: a patient but unyielding determination to get even. In an e-mail this morning to our relatives in France I mentioned the television commentators who are casually saying things like, "Innocent lives will of course be lost," in this new war on terrorism, and "there will be American casualties but the American people are prepared for that."

One of the most thoughtful of the current class of Jane Addams Fellows asked whether we might find a way to *talk* with moderates in the Middle East and elsewhere, in effect to isolate the extremists on both sides and to create a coalition for dialogue and peace rather than limit ourselves to a military coalition intent on retaliation. Alissa's goal is to prevent more violence and to move toward peace. Another of the Fellows makes the point that more killing of innocent people cannot balance the killing of innocent people that has already taken place.

Because their perspective seems missing from most of the public commentary, I may tend to overemphasize it. I can't speak for the Fellows on this point, but in my own view there is also a real need for a coordinated and balanced response: there is police work to be done, if not military work, and there are some very bad people to be dealt with -- political criminals --as well as innocent people on "the other side."

I say "the other side" because I want to contrast those who are committed to reason and the rule of law (that's one side) and those who subordinate reason and the rule of law to religious faith (that's the other side). I shouldn't overlook the large middle ground where most of the people of the world find themselves, wanting no part of taking sides, wanting only to be left alone. As I watched and listened to a television biography of Osama bin Laden yesterday I followed the course of someone who has had all the advantages of birth and privilege -- wealth, education, and technical expertise -- to thrive in the modern world. In some respects, he has much in common with all of you: he is a member of a privileged elite with a strong sense of public service. But in his case all those advantages are corrupted by an unreasoning faith in what I hope is a pathological misinterpretation of Islam.

I don't expect the thought to enter the President's head, given his own uncritical religious bias, but religion has much to answer for these days. The Taliban have warned of a holy war against any Muslim who sides with the Americans in an attack on Afghanistan; mounting a Western holy war in response -- "You're either with us or against us" -- seems a step back from the Western tradition of reason based on discourse and the rule of law.

It's time for the moderates to play a central role. A young Jane Addams Fellow understands conflict resolution better than the President of the United States.

As a believer of sorts -- True Believers make it very hard to sustain one's religious commitments these days and so I'm not at the moment more than "a believer of sorts" -- I struggle every day to find some way to balance the conflicting and sometimes incompatible claims of reason and religion. Reason helps me sort things out and make sense of things while religion helps me sustain my commitments and values. With all the emphasis on *prayer*, I think it is more important to devote our intellectual energies to *thought* this point. Prayer may bring comfort but it may not be the time for comfort; we have yet to earn our peace of mind. Blind faith, the blind faith that denies reason, is self-imposed ignorance and irrationality and is unworthy of us as humans. Its perverse Christian variations are on the same moral plane as the Muslim perversions that killed all those innocent people last week. It's time once again for the claims of religion to yield to the claims of reason. Totalistic "religion" will not solve our problems.

When I have coffee in a week or so with the good friend and fellow-amateur philosopher who is also my pastor, we will talk about these things. He will remind me of the origins of charity and compassion, and I will remember once again that Reason isn't sufficient unto itself, either: *Systems of explanation illuminate up to a point, then falsify*. My system of explanation, yours, bin Laden's, all of them. If religion has a lot to answer for, reasoning humans generally have much to be humble about in the face of human irrationality. It will be our reason, not our religious faith, that will help us deal with bin Laden and those who would follow him. It will be our reason that provides us the common ground where we can work together despite our religious differences. Religion may add a vital dimension to the good society we're working toward, but it is our reason that get us there.

My reading the past few months has concentrated on the essays of Montaigne. He makes me think.

RLP